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## Ensuring high-quality staff for English learners

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July 2016

# Governance Brief

## English Learners in Focus, Issue 3

*Ensuring High-Quality Staff for English Learners*

by Julie Maxwell-Jolly, Manuel Buenrostro and Magaly Lavadenz

### Introduction

This brief is part of CSBA's effort to shed light on the education needs of the diverse preK-12 students who attend California schools. It is the third in a series focused on English learners — students whose first language and the primary language they speak at home is not English. The series explores strategies for providing English learners with an equal opportunity to achieve their potential, and highlights schools, districts and programs that are successfully achieving that goal. The focus of this brief is on the importance of staff who are well-prepared to meet the needs of English learners, and on strategies for recruiting, supporting and retaining them, particularly in view of the current teacher shortage.

### California's English Learner Population

Given that almost 25 percent of California's students are English learners, the state's strength and prosperity is closely tied to their success. California also has the largest share of the country's English learners: More than 30 percent of the 4.5 million English learners in the U.S. attend school here.<sup>1</sup>

The nearly 1.4 million English learners in California are not a uniform group — they come to school with a wide range of backgrounds, experiences and needs. Nonetheless, the primary language of 84 percent of California's English learners is Spanish and the great majority (approximately 86 percent) are from low-income families.<sup>2</sup>

### Highly Qualified Staff to Promote English Learners' Academic Success

The evidence is strong that well-prepared, experienced teachers are essential to student learning. While not all aspects of what makes a good teacher may be quantifiable, research does tell us that the quality of teachers' undergraduate and teacher preparation work has an impact on student learning. In addition, there is evidence that on average, students of teachers who have some years of classroom experience outperform students taught by beginning instructors.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Advantage of Teachers with Cultural and Linguistic Background and Understanding of Students*

Additional research provides evidence that a cultural and linguistic match between teachers and their students can contribute to greater student success. Studies have shown that African-American and Latino students have greater academic achievement in classrooms taught by teachers from similar backgrounds. This results from a number of factors, including how teachers from the same cultural background as their students serve as role models, make decisions about instruction that is culturally relevant, have a greater understanding of student behavior, are less likely to suspend or expel students, counteract negative expectations and reinforce higher expectations for their students.<sup>4</sup>

When it comes to teaching English learners, teachers who are from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds as their students have another important advantage: They can more accurately diagnose whether or not students' challenges are primarily due to limitations in their English language proficiency or in their ability to grasp content concepts. This results in a lower likelihood of over or under diagnosing them for learning disabilities.

In addition, staff members who understand their students' backgrounds and view their language, culture and experience as an asset rather than a deficit, contribute to a positive school environment.<sup>5</sup> Research has noted that students who feel connected to school, who have a sense of belonging, and who have supportive teachers, perform better on both academic and non-academic measures.<sup>6</sup>

An especially important advantage of teachers and other school staff who understand the culture and language of English learners is their ability to communicate with their families: A critical strategy for increasing parent/guardian engagement in their children's education. In California, 43 percent of students live in households where they primarily speak a language other than English at home.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, recruiting and hiring teachers and staff who are bilingual and come from a similar cultural background to many of their students is a necessary aspect of an effective parent/guardian engagement strategy.

### *Need for English Learner Teachers Who Can Integrate Language and Content*

Teachers skilled in integrating language and content for English language learners are especially critical as California implements new content standards that include a stronger focus on high-level language skills. This content and language integration is a central focus of the new English Language Arts/English Language Development Framework, adopted in 2014. The Framework links content and language in a way intended to prepare English learners, like their non-English learner peers, in the areas of critical thinking and problem solving along with collaboration and communication across the content areas. This work will require not only qualified teachers of English language development for English learners but also general education and subject-area teachers who have the skills to integrate English language development standards within core subjects. For example, while the Next Generation Science Standards provide an important opportunity to deliver instruction based on real-world applications — instruction that research has shown to particularly benefit English learners — proper implementation will require science teachers who understand how to ensure access to science instruction for English learners without diluting content.

## The Current Statewide Teacher Shortage

With California experiencing a teacher shortage, there is a critical need for teachers — and particularly for teachers who are skilled at English language instruction. The current shortage is not due to an overall increase in students: The student population is relatively stable statewide — although this varies by region with some districts continuing to see increases while others are experiencing declining enrollment. Rather, the current shortage results from several factors. These include efforts to lower class size to pre-recession levels, large numbers of teachers retiring in recent years, a relatively high rate of attrition among new teachers and a diminished supply of new teachers. Enrollment in teacher preparation programs dropped sharply during the years of recession when many teachers were laid off and districts were not hiring new teachers. Meanwhile, those who remained experienced constant lay off warnings, salary freezes and diminished support due to budget cuts. All of these factors in turn resulted in unfavorable working conditions, which are likely to have contributed to attrition and decreasing interest in the teaching profession.<sup>8</sup>

The shortage is becoming drastic: Total enrollment in teacher preparation programs dropped by half from 2009-10 to 2013-14, from 36,577 to 18,984. If this trend continues, there will be far fewer teachers to fill the projected need for 21,483 new teachers during the 2015-16 school year.<sup>9</sup>

### *Unequal Impact on Highest Need Students of the 2000-01 Teacher Shortage*

If the past is any indication, the current teacher shortage could have an unequal impact on students with the greatest need. During the significant teacher shortage of 2000-01, California experienced an increase in the disproportionate placement of low-income students of color and English learners in classrooms with the least prepared teachers.<sup>10</sup> During those years, 15 percent of the state's teachers were underprepared, that is, they had not completed a credential program and/or were teaching out of their field (e.g., history majors teaching math), and most of these teachers were in schools with the highest proportion of students in poverty and students of color. For example, while 22 percent of teachers in high-poverty schools were underprepared, only 7 percent of these teachers were placed in low-poverty schools.<sup>11</sup> This disproportionality affected English learners, of whom nearly 84 percent are low-income.

## *Shortage of Highly Skilled English Learner Teachers*

Not only is there a teacher shortage overall, but there is an even greater shortage of teachers who are well-prepared to work with English learners. Policy changes in 2002 that embedded an English learner authorization within the Multiple and Single Subject credentials, and in 2006 that did the same with regard to the Education Specialist Credential, have resulted in fewer teachers receiving a more robust and targeted preparation in the instruction of English learners. Therefore, while most teachers who receive a credential today have some level of preparation for working with English learners, far fewer new teachers have the deeper expertise in English learner instruction. While new teachers could choose to seek more advanced preparation for working with English learners, there is little incentive for them to do so since their credential already embeds an authorization for teaching English learners. Teachers prepared outside of California or those receiving their credential before 2002, must still obtain an English learner authorization, mainly earned through completion of California Teacher of English Learners (CTEL) coursework or passage of the CTEL examination.

In addition, the teacher shortage has resulted in a significant increase in certifications and permits that encompass less rigorous preparation overall. For example, the numbers of university and district intern credentials continue to rise: During the 2014-15 school year, 2,806 English learner intern authorizations were issued, while only 2,259 were issued three years before during the 2011-12 school year. The number of waivers of authorization to teach English learners is on the rise as well: There were 382 waivers for English learners issued during the 2014-15 school year compared to less than half as many, 181, during the 2011-12 school year.<sup>12</sup> While the numbers of these less rigorous credentials are small, their trend is significantly upward, reflecting the growing shortage of teachers statewide, and the need for districts to find ways to address this shortage in their local schools.

## *English Learner Authorizations Indicating Greater Expertise*

Aside from the English learner authorization embedded within Multiple Subject, Single Subject, and Education Specialist credentials, there are other authorizations available for teaching English learners that require a higher level of coursework and training. One of these is a Bilingual Authorization, which can be earned alongside a Multiple Subject, Single Subject or Education Specialist Credential. After the 2009-10 school year, California implemented more rigorous preparation standards for Bilingual Authorizations, which can be met through coursework, commission-approved examinations, or a combination of the two. While the ways that teachers have earned

Bilingual Authorizations has varied over the past 10 years, the numbers have remained steady. During the 2014-15 school year, there were 369 Bilingual Authorizations issued, compared to 370 issued during the 2009-10 school year.<sup>13</sup> However, this is well below the demand for these teachers. There is an estimated need for at least 513 new bilingual-credentialed teachers during the 2015-16 school year.<sup>14</sup>

The other, more advanced authorization is the Single Subject-World Language: ELD Authorization. The World Language: ELD content area may be added as a stand-alone authorization to a Single Subject Teaching Credential, and is earned through completing a program with approved coursework. This credential allows for departmentalized English language development instruction for secondary students.

## **Strategies and Solutions**

### *Solutions to the Broader Teacher Shortage*

The Learning Policy Institute's "Addressing California's Emerging Teacher Shortage," proposes several policy recommendations to address the emerging teacher shortage in California. Their recommendations focus on both recruiting new teachers to the field, and retaining those who are already teaching in California's schools.

They note that strategies related to retaining teachers are often overlooked but are as important as those to attract new teachers to the profession. A 2014 report by the Alliance for Excellence in Education highlighted that nearly 19,000 teachers left the profession in California during the 2007-08 school year. While this estimate included retirees and non-voluntary leavers, just reducing this number by a quarter would nearly eliminate the teacher shortage.<sup>15</sup> According to the report, this would also save California schools \$82 million to \$178 million in attrition costs.<sup>16</sup>

The Learning Policy Institute discusses key strategies to attract and retain teachers, including mentoring, teaching conditions, support, preparation and compensation.<sup>17</sup> Below are some of the recommendations from the report, which cover aspects of these strategies:

- » Provide all beginning teachers with high-quality support and mentoring, which can reduce early attrition and enhance competence, for example, through well-designed Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) programs.
- » Improve teaching conditions by ensuring that administrators have the training to help them create and support strong learning environments for teachers and students.

- » Offer urban and rural teacher residencies in hard-to-staff areas that include an apprenticeship, coursework and a living stipend in exchange for a commitment to teach three to five years in the district.
- » Create more avenues into teaching, including high school pathway programs, collaborations with local colleges to recruit community members into the profession and paraprofessional pipeline programs.

### *Solutions Specific to English Learners*

While any solution to the broader teacher shortage will help English learners, in this section we offer specific recommendations for recruiting and retaining teachers and other school staff for English learners. While the recommendations presented here are not exhaustive, they are meant to ignite a conversation within counties and districts from which additional ideas can be developed.

- » **Recruit Diverse Teachers.** The teaching profession is not as ethnically or linguistically diverse as the student population in California. Yet, teachers with similar backgrounds and experiences to their students can be particularly effective. Strategies that successfully address the need for more diverse teachers include grow-your-own, teacher residency and other programs create pathways to a teaching career (such as the Teach Tomorrow in Oakland). What these initiatives have in common is that they actively recruit diverse candidates with a passion for teaching in high-need schools, and have a record of retaining these teachers longer. Ensuring that such programs continue to focus on recruiting diverse candidates and on supporting bilingual teaching candidates can help to expand the pipeline of highly skilled teachers for English learners. In addition, districts should encourage support staff, such as counselors and paraprofessionals, to become teachers and provide them with incentives for pursuing a career in education, especially if they are bilingual or come from a similar background of their students.

#### **CSU Fresno Teacher Residency**

This 15- to 18-month residency program is run through CSU Fresno and in partnership with the Fresno Unified School District. The program helps prepare new middle school teachers for the classroom with an emphasis on math and science instruction. It combines rigorous masters-level coursework, teacher-credentialing coursework and a yearlong apprenticeship in a classroom with a mentor teacher supported by a comprehensive

professional development curriculum. Residents also receive a stipend during the training period and make a commitment to teach in the Fresno Unified School District for a minimum of three years after completing the program. National statistics on teacher residency programs show an 84 percent three-year retention rate and an enrollment of significantly more teachers of color than traditional credentialing programs.<sup>18</sup> Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chico also have similar teacher residency programs.

- » **Reduce Financial Barriers to Entry into the Profession.** Along with programs that recruit and attract diverse teachers, recognizing the financial limitations that affect entry into the profession is also critical. Entering the teaching profession means additional coursework, test fees and other preparation expenses that candidates with lower incomes can find challenging. As California considers incentives for recruiting and retaining teachers, it should target resources where they are needed most, focusing investments on teachers who make a commitment to serve the hardest to staff schools and hardest to fill subjects, including those serving a large number of English learners.
- » **Treat Teachers as Respected Professionals.** Research shows that it is highly important for teacher satisfaction and retention that they are treated as professionals. Related to this is providing them with appropriate time for planning and collaboration — time that is even more critical when considering the demands on all teachers to implement the more rigorous new standards that integrate content and language for English learners. Another way for districts to support teacher professionalism is to recognize and reward teachers who have particular skills and responsibilities for working with English learners.

#### **The Promise of Learning Networks**

There is emerging research on the promise of learning networks for improving student success.<sup>19</sup> An example of within-school- or district learning networks is a coaching structure, which includes ongoing analysis to improve instruction, guided observation and reflection on practice. Building these networks for the entire teacher pipeline, from pre-service through induction and beyond, can help ensure that all teachers of English learners are of the highest quality possible.

- » **Promote Bilingualism for Teachers and Staff.** This strategy has three components: 1) recruit bilingual staff, 2) provide professional development to build the bilingual competence of existing staff and 3) support career ladders for staff who have such competence. With regard to the recruitment of staff, districts and counties can benefit from looking within their own ranks. For example, providing incentives for a proven bilingual teaching aide to become a teacher. In addition, school staff and teachers can develop their skills through professional development and collaboration with their bilingual colleagues, which can improve the practice of everyone in the school. Another important component to promoting bilingualism is ensuring that principals and other district and county leaders also receive training to build their bilingual competencies and that such competencies are valued when districts and counties search for new school leaders.

### Lessons from Top Performing Districts

In “The Language of Reform: English Learners in California’s Shifting Education Landscape,” the Education Trust-West identified 11 top-performing districts for English learner achievement and found some common trends in their practice. For example, educators in these high-performing districts believe that English learners can achieve at high levels and that their home languages are an asset rather than a liability. These districts also ensure that teachers are skilled in meeting the needs of English learners and support this through professional learning opportunities and time to collaborate. For example, Hacienda La Puente Unified School District offers professional development to all administrators and teachers of English learners on the English language development standards and English learner instructional strategies. Los Alamitos Unified School District has implemented a five-year professional development and coaching plan, including training for K-12 teachers in strategies for teaching English learners, including reading aligned with the California State Standards.<sup>20</sup>

## What District and County Boards Can Do

### Ask Questions

Governance teams have the responsibility and authority to make decisions that can significantly raise the achievement of all students and close gaps for English learners. Taking advantage of opportunities to look at data and advance promising strategies to recruit, support and retain highly skilled staff can go a long way toward achieving that goal. Asking the superintendent and staff

to answer following questions can help district and county boards in their efforts to increase the availability of highly skilled staff for English learners.

### Knowledge of Current Staff

- » What are the languages, other than English, spoken at home by our students? Do we have materials and staff that promote effective communication with the families of these students?
- » Do we have the necessary well-trained staff with various roles and responsibilities to best support English learner educational success?
- » What training do we provide staff to support their understanding of and strategies for working with English learners and their families?

### Recruitment of New Staff

- » Are there successful teacher or staff pipelines for recruiting and retaining diverse candidates that we can model? How might we support the expansion of these pipelines?
- » What incentives and strategies do we provide to attract new teachers? Are there incentives targeted particularly to attract teachers with English learner expertise?

### Support and Retention of Current Staff

- » Are we investing adequately in professional development, mentorship and support for new teachers to work effectively with English learners?
- » Are there any programs to support and employ career advancement to staff with the cultural and linguistic competencies to effectively communicate with students and their families?

### Advocate for Resources and Programs

Governance teams can also advocate for additional resources and programs that can support their efforts to recruit, support and retain highly skilled teachers. For example, one of the recommendations from the Learning Policy Institute is to advocate for reinvestment in scholarship and loan forgiveness programs at the state and federal level. These programs offer loan forgiveness to teachers in exchange for a commitment to teach in high-need areas and subjects for a defined period.

As bills to help counties, districts and schools better manage the teacher shortage move through the Legislature, governance teams can use CSBA’s advocacy resources, which include a list of positions, sponsored legislation and tips for effective advocacy. For more information visit [www.csba.org/Advocacy/LegislativeAdvocacy](http://www.csba.org/Advocacy/LegislativeAdvocacy).

## Conclusion

Almost one-quarter of California's K-12 students are English learners and 43 percent of the state's students are from households where the primary language is other than English. Therefore, most schools can expect to serve at least one student who either is an English learner or comes from a family where another language is spoken at home. Based on this, and keeping in mind the importance of a quality instructor, the need to increase the pipeline of qualified teachers and staff with the competencies to help English learners achieve educational success is clear.

CSBA will continue to support boards in their efforts to improve outcomes for California's diverse student population. It is our hope that this brief, along with our first two publications in this series will continue to provide valuable information for governance teams and spark important discussions about strategies in counties, districts and schools. Subsequent briefs will continue to focus on English learners and other issues of importance to our board members.

### Resources for Board Members

CSBA's "English Learners in Focus, Issue 1: Demographic and Achievement Profile of California's English Learners": [www.csba.org/BriefEL1](http://www.csba.org/BriefEL1).

CSBA's "English Learners in Focus, Issue 2: The Promise of Two-Way Immersion Programs": [www.csba.org/BriefEL2](http://www.csba.org/BriefEL2).

The Education Trust-West's "The Language of Reform: English Learners in California's Shifting Education Landscape": <http://bit.ly/28SGdPp>.

## Endnotes

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